



The Estonian Dream

The next 5000 years



Authors

Priit Hõbemägi is Editor-in-Chief of of Estonia's largest and oldest daily newspaper *Postimees*. He is a renowned opinion writer for national media and was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award of the Estonian Newspaper Association in 2016.

Kersti Kaljulaid served as the President of the Republic of Estonia from 2016 to 2021. Before her presidency, she was a member of the European Court of Auditors, advised Prime Minister Mart Laar, and held various high-level positions in the energy, investment banking, and telecom sectors. President Kaljulaid is a vocal advocate for human rights, the rule of law, freedom of speech, and democracy.

Dr Reinhard Krumm headed the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's Regional Office for the Baltic States (Riga) from 2021 to 2024. From 1991 to 1998 he worked as a journalist in Eastern Europe, as the Baltic correspondent for Deutsche Presse-Agentur (dpa) in Riga and later serving as the Moscow correspondent of *Der Spiegel* magazine. For the FES he directed the offices in the Russian Federation (Moscow), the Regional Office for Cooperation and Peace in Europe (Vienna) and the Department of Central and Eastern Europe (Berlin).

The Estonian Dream

The next 5000 years

Introduction

Do the people of Estonia have a dream? A dream for their personal life, for their country? And are they able to follow that dream? Is it the state that fulfills the citizen's dream, or are the citizens the ones responsible for making their own dreams come true? And are there different dreams among the elderly and the youth? Is there a common Estonian dream, or does each region have its own?

These are the main questions the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) wanted to ask the Estonian, but also, in two other studies, the Latvian and Lithuanian people. To find answers, the FES worked together with the Estonian polling institute Turu/Uuringute, the Latvian polling Institute SKDS and the Lithuanian polling institute Baltijos Tyrimai. Over three workshops and with the support of focus groups it was possible to draft a common questionnaire for the three Baltic states, consolidating the core questions and adding specific questions for each country.

The time for such an endeavour is right. Estonia has been a member of the EU and NATO for 20 years. Despite the Russian military aggression against Ukraine, Estonians feel secure in the knowledge that they are an integral part of both organisations. The Baltic countries no longer want to be referred to as former Soviet republics. And rightly so. More than thirty years after its second independence (the first period of independence was from 1918 to 1940), Estonia is a stable, democratic and prosperous country.

But what is next? What are people aiming for, what is the guiding motive for the next decades? Their dream could be close to the American Dream, which came into existence only about a hundred years ago. This conjures up the good life: freedom, stability and the opportunity for everyone to move up – financially and socially. And this ideal still remains very popular around the world. If you type the words 'American' and 'dream' into Google, you get over 1 billion hits.

But that dream is also about the understanding that Americans did not inherit their nation but earned it. A new state, new citizens, new goals. This can be said to a certain extent about Estonia, as well. The citizens actively worked to make independence happen, in 1990/1991 as well as in 1918. It is a nation and people that completely set itself apart from the Russian Empire, and certainly different than the Soviet Union.

And now it is up to the Estonians themselves to create a guiding compass for their future. A dream alone is clearly not enough, but it helps. It is a vision, a description of the national character and a way to present itself abroad. These are also some of the reasons that the American Dream was born. But whereas that dream was articulated in the depths of the Great Depression of the 1930s, Estonians can define their dream in an economically less critical time – despite sharing a border with a currently nightmarish neighbour, the Russian Federation.

Dr Reinhard Krumm

Director of the FES Regional Office for the Baltic States

Foreword:

The Estonian dream 2024

There was a dream – to regain independence. Then there was another dream – to make this independence and democracy sustainable. The consensus was that this could be done by joining the EU and NATO. These objectives were achieved.

And overall, Estonians are fairly happy with these decisions. Jana Toom, one of the most Russian-minded politicians in Estonia, once quipped: 'no one in Estonia wants to wake up tomorrow in the Russian Federation'. For her, this certainly included Estonia's Russian-speaking minority.

The percentage of Estonians viewing the EU over 20 years of membership has been higher than the original vote to join. The rural population in particular has learned to value the support provided by EU agricultural policy, even if the level has sometimes been considered discriminatory compared with what the older Member States receive.

Estonians wanted to join the euro area to avoid the currency risk. But the average person in the street wanted the euro so they no longer had to change money every time they crossed the border into Latvia or Finland. Estonians wanted to be part of Schengen because it makes travel easy. But again, the average person does not realise that being an EU citizen means easier travel globally as well, because an EU passport has so many advantages thanks to the EU's global status.

Estonians may have a fair idea that trading freely with our partners and neighbours within the single market is useful. But we give much less thought to the beneficial trade agreements we enjoy with the rest of the world because we are in the EU.

The situation regarding NATO is even more complicated. One question in the survey wanted to know how being a NATO member helps – or hinders – Estonians' ability to realise their dreams. Unless you are an ambitious young officer, of course, your ability to realise what you want to achieve in life does

not depend on NATO in any way. At the same time, we realise that remaining part of the European way of life, as Ursula von der Leyen's European Commission rather grandly calls being an EU citizen, depends very much on being part of NATO.

Estonians are also understanding better and better the limitations that forced our neighbour Finland to walk a tightrope between the Soviet Union and the West during the Cold War and permanently disappoint both.

Finns write books about it now, but these were not so common when Estonia made the decision to join NATO. Clarity about our position, our belonging to Europe, is becoming more and more evident to all Estonians.

But does this affect our dreams somehow differently than, say, those of the citizens of Germany?

I don't think so. People dream of simple things – social security, a rewarding life, a decent education for their children, and pleasant and affordable living conditions.

These things in Estonia are as good as anywhere in Europe. Our income levels are reasonable, the cost of living is converging on the EU average, but so are wages. Far more Estonians own their homes than Germans, and getting on the property ladder, even if it is not as easy as 15 years ago, is still affordable.

Our education model is extremely good and ensures social mobility, as it is free up to the tertiary level. And PISA tests show that the quality, on average, is good. Indeed, there are no schools in Estonia, whether rural or suburban, where education is so bad that students cannot reach the level necessary for university entry.

The best university in the former Soviet bloc is in Tartu, Estonia. Our health-care system is funded in such a way that poor people don't need to fear bankruptcy if they need to visit a doctor. They aren't forced to pay and then seek reimbursement maybe months later. Hospitals settle directly with the Healthcare Foundation.

Of course, we have nagging worries about elderly care, sustainability of medical care at the current level, aging teachers and so on. But it would be highly unusual not to have some issues. Everybody does.

And the dreams of young Estonians or Russian-speaking Estonians do not differ. The scars in the souls of their grandparents do, of course, but even despite the fact that Russia is now doing in Ukraine what it once did in Estonia – and, for that matter, in Soviet-controlled German territory during and after the Second World War – it has not broken the will of young Estonians to be recognised as citizens of free and democratic Europe, and Estonia as a European nation.

Many imagine there are differences where there are none. Segregation in the Estonian school system is considered a bad thing by Russian-speaking young people. They want to be integrated from the first day of school. Their grandparents saw Estonian language teaching as discrimination against Russian people.

For the young, the past is mainly something they argue about – or refuse to argue about – at family gatherings. And it is so tiresome to seek out every pocket in society in which national background influences or may influence what people feel and what they consider Estonian society's strengths and weaknesses.

Yes, there are those who feel the current societal model does not serve their dreams. Around 20 per cent of Estonians vote for the alt-right EKRE because they somehow feel they have been left out of the past 30 years of economic

success in Estonia. Around 25 per cent of young men in Estonia, like everywhere in Europe, are doubtful about the current mainstream thinking on gender equality. Many think that Finnish and Swedish social models are exemplary, but few want to pay that level of tax. Even fewer can make that connection.

To sum up, we are like the rest of Europe. We enjoy what our social market economies, the EU, the NATO security umbrella and so on give us and we are apt to forget that these are all tremendous achievements. But we don't realise how fragile it all is. We should, and so should all EU citizens!

Kersti Kaljulaid
President of Estonia 2016-2021

The Estonian Dream

The next 5000 years

Priit Hõbemägi

The editor-in-chief of *Postimees*

All fairy tales start with a dream. Fairy tale characters achieve their dreams by pursuing their wishes, and the same is true of us. In the 'Tale of the Fisherman and the Fish' the fisherman catches the Golden Fish, which grants wishes. Similarly, the Estonian Dream starts with the question: 'If you had three wishes, what would they be?'

These three questions were put to 1,000 Estonian residents during the survey on the Estonian Dream, organised by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. But before commenting on the answers, we need to take a closer look at who lives in Estonia and what affects their understanding of the Estonian dream. At first glance, the consolidated respondents' answers appear straightforward. The first wish is for good health for themselves and their loved ones. Another desire is to enjoy prosperity without needing to count every penny. The third wish is to live in a house or apartment of their own. However, the reality is more complex, and the reasons are rooted in history.

In Estonia, the population is divided into two groups: the Estonian-speaking majority and the mainly Russian-speaking minority. In 2024, approximately 1,375,000 people live in Estonia. According to Statistics Estonia, 932,000 of them are native Estonians, while

442,700 are of other nationalities, including the largest minority group, Russians, who number 269,200. Among the non-Estonians, there are several other Slavic-speaking nations, such as Ukrainians and Belarusians. This population composition developed gradually after the Second World War due to mass immigration imposed by the Soviet Union. Most of the non-Estonians who migrated to Estonia after the war were Russian-speaking people or their descendants. In this study, the term 'non-Estonians' refers to residents of the country who are not of Estonian ethnicity and do not have Estonian as a first language; most of them are Estonian citizens, however.

Before the Second World War, during the Republic of Estonia (1920–1940), only slightly less than 4 per cent of the population were Russian speakers. After the Soviet Union reoccupied Estonia in 1944 and forcibly annexed it, extensive Russification began. Tens of thousands of Russian speakers from across the Soviet Union and Russia were brought to work in new factories, following orders from Moscow. Due to the lack of sufficient residential space, large new residential areas were quickly built for them in many cities, consisting of robust five-storey and nine-storey panel blocks.

As a result of such population policies, approximately half of the residents in Tallinn, the capital of the Republic of Estonia, are non-Estonians who live in their own districts and communicate in Russian, many of whom have not made efforts to integrate during the past 30 years of independence. The situation is even more pronounced in eastern Estonia, where only about 5% of the population in the city of Narva, near the Russian border, are ethnic Estonians.

Returning to the question of the Estonian dream, it becomes clear why the answers to the same questions vary significantly. Estonians and non-Estonians often respond to certain questions very differently. Thus, it is almost impossible to speak of a single 'Estonian dream'; instead, there are dreams of two different communities, which are sometimes quite similar but often quite different. When looking at the consolidated responses of all respondents, it is important to remember that the opinions of Estonians account for 70% and those of non-Estonians for 30%.

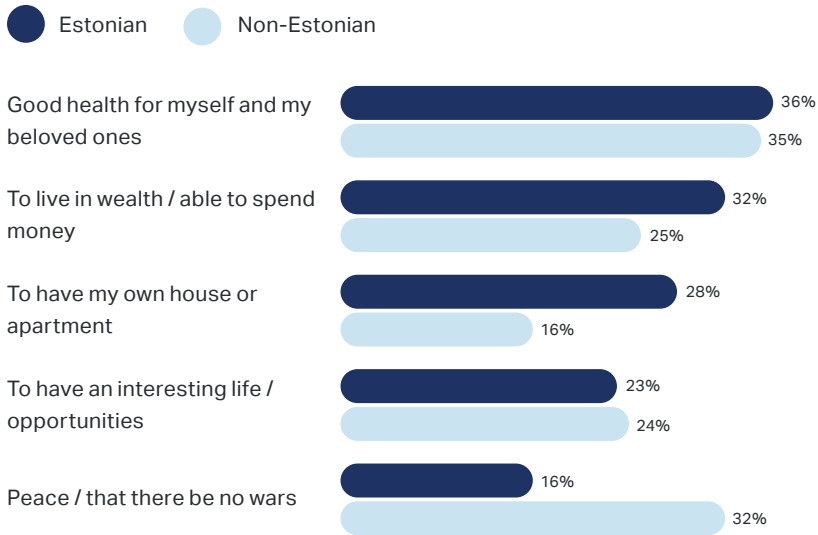
Let's get back to the three 'fairy tale wishes'. If you look at the consolidated general response of all the respondents, it is considered important to lead an interesting life, follow your own path of self-

actualisation, live in a rational society, have a good job, among other things.

Substantive differences are evident when we look at the answers of Estonians and non-Estonians separately. The biggest wish for both communities is good health for themselves and their loved ones – this is the most important issue for 36% of Estonians and 35% of non-Estonians.

For Estonians, the second most important wish is to lead a prosperous life and have enough money to spend, which is significant for 35% of Estonians. However, 32% of Russian-speakers consider peace and the absence of war to be the second most important wish. At the same time, only 16% of Estonians consider peace important. When answering the question about leading an interesting life and having opportunities, there is more or less agreement: 23% of Estonians and 24% of non-Estonians consider it important. However, only 16% of non-Estonians consider owning their own house or apartment important (it was the third most important wish for Estonians). For Estonians, the ranking follows this order of importance: health, prosperity, own house, an interesting life, and peace. For non-Estonians it is: health, peace, prosperity, and an interesting life.

If you would have three wishes, what would they be?



Here we see beginning to emerge a complex, controversial, and at the same time humanly understandable picture of how the two communities live together in Estonia. In many aspects, human dreams and hopes are similar, such as the importance of family, friends and leisure time. In Ida-Viru County, which is predominantly inhabited by non-Estonians, the significance of religion (more specifically, Russian Orthodoxy) is more important (33%) than anywhere else. However, there are often fundamentally different views.

Estonia is a small country, covering only 45,339 square kilometres. To the east of Estonia lies Russia, which is separated from Estonia for the most part by Lake Peipus and the Narva River. To the south is Latvia.

To the north, across the Gulf of Finland, about 70 kilometres from the closest point of Estonia, is Finland. Finns and Estonians are related to each other; both nations are of Finno-Ugric origin, and the languages are similar. Since the adoption of Christianity in the thirteenth century, Estonia has been conquered and ruled by Danes, Germans, Poles, Russians, and Swedes. Great and devastating wars have crossed Estonia, such as the Livonian War in the sixteenth century and the Great Northern War (1700–1721), as a result of which the territory of Estonia was annexed to the Russian Empire. After the Great Northern War, famine and plague left only about 100,000 people in Estonia.

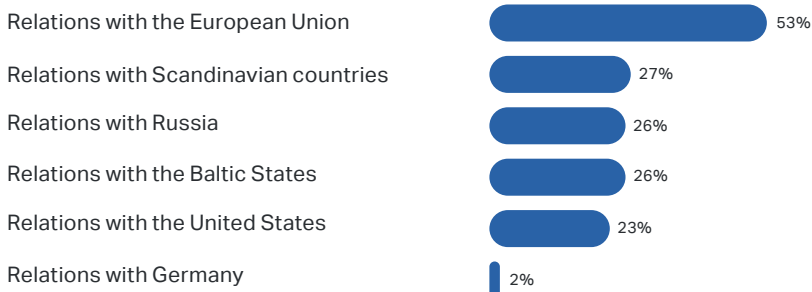
Due to the small size of its territory, getting along with neighbours is vital for Estonia.

Estonia has never had problems with Finland or with Latvia. However, relations with Russia have been exceptionally complicated over the centuries. For almost a thousand years, the territory of Estonia has been the victim of constant Russian attacks and raids.

Therefore, the question 'With which countries are international relations considered the most important?' is a very delicate one. Looking at all respondents together, relations with the European Union (53%), then with the Scandinavian countries (27%), and then with Russia (26%) are

generally considered the most important. These are followed by the Baltic countries (26%) and the United States (23%). However, there is a significant difference between the responses of Estonians and non-Estonians. For Estonians, the most important relations are with the European Union, the Scandinavian countries, the Baltic countries (Latvia and Lithuania), and the USA. Only then come relations with Russia (11%), which are considered about three times less important than relations with the United States and five times less important than relations with the European Union.

Please tell me, with which countries do you consider international relations to be the most important for Estonia in the future?



However, a different picture emerges in the opinions of non-Estonians. The most important relations are with Russia (55%), then with the European Union (47%), followed by the Baltic countries and the United States. Additionally, 10% of non-Estonians consider relations with China important, while only 3% of Estonians would agree.

To further enhance the picture, it should be noted that, for historical reasons, the easternmost region of Estonia, Ida-Viru County, is inhabited mainly by Russian-speaking people. This is due to the Russification policy that prevailed in the Soviet Union, which filled industrial areas with labour brought from Russia. Considering that the border city of Narva

and Russia are connected by a bridge over the Narva River, and that the textile factories with their high labour demand were built there already during the Tsarist period, Russification was very easy. Because of this, it is understandable that 48% of the residents of Ida-Viru County, which is inhabited mainly by a Russian-speaking population, consider relations with Russia to be the most important. Ida-Viru County is the target of continuous Russian propaganda activities and is within easy reach of Russian propaganda media. The Republic of Estonia has been forced to ban the broadcasting of many Russian state propaganda channels on Estonian territory. However, in Narva, due to the proximity of Russian transmitters, it is possible to watch them even without a TV antenna. The Narva local government, which consists mainly of non-Estonians, often holds positions that differ greatly from the general positions adopted by Estonia.

These puzzle pieces form the complex, multi-ethnic, and patchy reality of today's Estonia: a massive Russian-speaking minority, born from the Soviet occupation of half a century, coupled with the delayed transition to a unified Estonian-language school system, which has been postponed for the past thirty years. The continuation of the Russian-language school system until recently has resulted in a Russian-speaking minority in Narva and Tallinn who are less integrated, speak Estonian poorly or not at all, and have a tendency to look towards Russia on all issues. Due to the former migration policy of the Soviet Union, the Russian-speaking minority is concentrated in Ida-Viru County and the Lasnamäe residential district of the capital Tallinn.

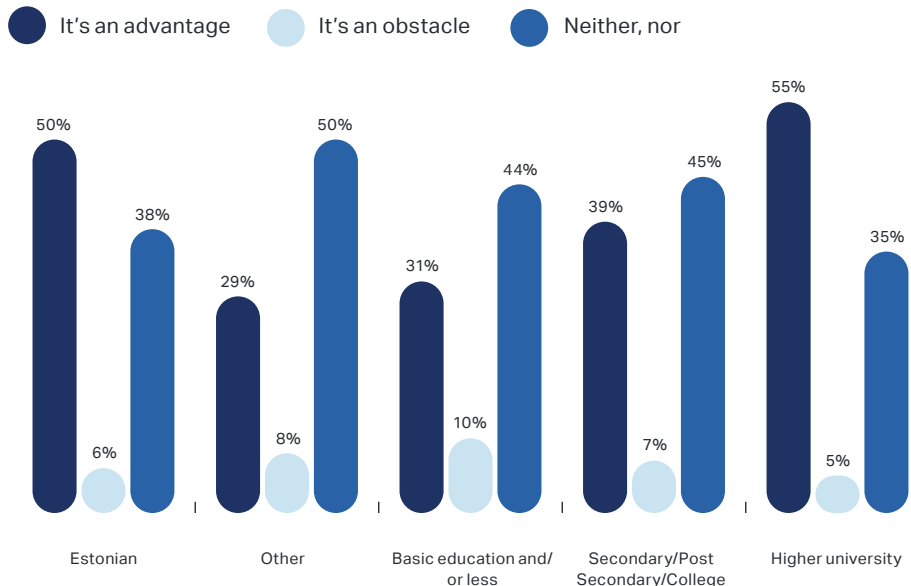
When Estonia, which was a major contributor to the collapse of the Soviet Union, adopted the Declaration of Sovereignty in 1988, this was the beginning of a long journey, of which the restoration of Estonia's independence in 1991 was only a part. The country had to be rebuilt from scratch and hastened to catch up with the developed Western countries. Estonia chose to follow European integration. The main role models were prosperous and democratic Scandinavian welfare states close to Estonia, which were a source of envy but also considered kindred spirits. The geographic proximity of Sweden, and of Finland in particular, also meant constant comparison with neighbours, driving the urge to raise the standard of living and promote the functioning of the government. In the long run, this was a very important motivator. And success came: today, the capital of Finland, Helsinki, and the capital of Estonia, Tallinn, are considered twin cities. Passenger ferries cross the Gulf of Finland several dozen times a day between the two cities, and millions of passengers travel from one shore to the other every year. Estonia and Finland have successfully integrated into the economic area of the Gulf of Finland, along with ever-expanding tourism and trade. Together with Rail Baltic, a high-speed railway that will connect Estonia to Western Europe, Estonia will become an increasingly important trade and logistics partner for Finland. Kinship ethnicity, a similar Nordic way of thinking, and a similar language also play a role in this.

The Republic of Estonia, which regained its independence in 1991, had clear strategic goals that were recognised both politically

and nationally. The aim was to achieve economic stability and military security. In order to achieve economic stability, Estonia set the goal of becoming a member of the European Union, and the path to ensuring military security was accession to NATO. In 2004, after a ten-year preparatory period, Estonia became a member of the European Union. In the same year, Estonia also became a member of NATO. In 2011, Estonia joined the Eurozone and adopted the euro, replacing the Estonian kroon.

One would think that there would be no disagreement among the Estonian population about the importance of the European Union and NATO. But this is not true. Answers to the question 'Does Estonia's membership in the European Union support or hinder the achievement of your dreams?' show this clearly. We can again see the chasm between different communities. While half of Estonians (50%) think that membership in the European Union is beneficial for the fulfilment of dreams, only 29% of non-Estonians consider it positively.

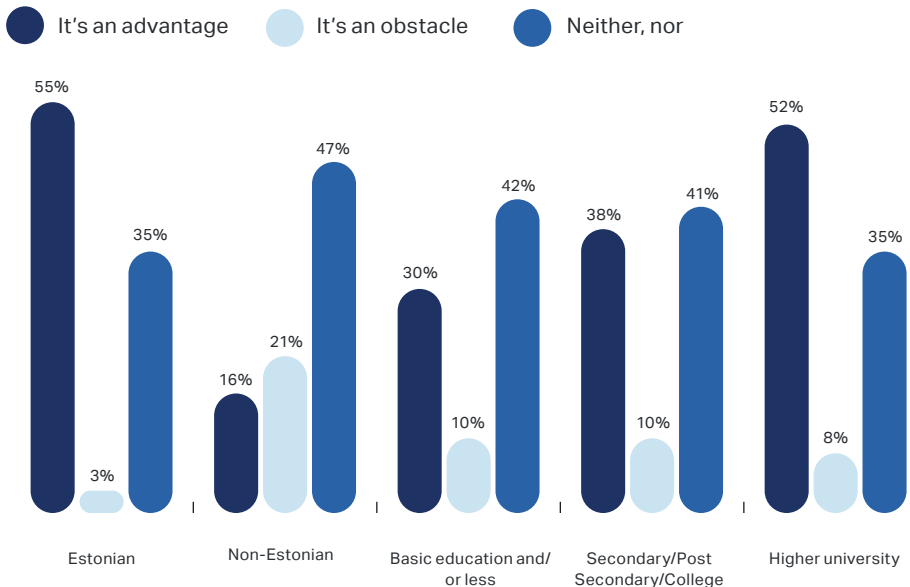
Is membership of Estonia in the EU an advantage or an obstacle for fulfilment of your dreams?



Some 50% of non-Estonians consider the impact of membership in the European Union on the fulfilment of dreams to be completely insignificant. There is an even sharper divide over the importance of international organisations when it comes to their attitude towards NATO. Around 55% of Estonians consider Estonia's NATO membership a positive factor in

fulfilling their dreams, but only 16% of non-Estonians would agree. And as many as 21% of non-Estonians believe that Estonia's NATO membership works against the fulfilment of their dreams (only 3% of Estonians think so). Estonians and non-Estonians have completely different attitudes towards the organisation that ensures national security.

Is membership of Estonia in NATO an advantage or an obstacle for fulfilment of your dreams?





Who is responsible for making dreams come true?

Estonians have an individualistic mindset and a Lutheran work ethic, which means they believe that it's up to them to work towards their dream. 'Work, then love will come', we like to quote from the monument of our national literature *Truth and Justice* by Estonian author Anton Hansen-Tammsaare. It's a five-part epic novel about one family's story as land and farm owners, cultivating the land, educating their children, and achieving their goals with hard work, not sparing any effort. The mindset of the Russian-speaking population, by contrast, can be considered rather communal, in which the individual plays a much smaller role than the community. This can be considered the backdrop of the historical Russian communal way of living, along with Russian Orthodoxy, also reflecting the influence of Soviet society. The role of the individual is small there; the community has the decision-making power, although everything is dominated by an authoritarian leader. The expectation that someone else – the government or the community – is responsible for making dreams come true is completely in line with this approach.

Now let us consider how the situation has developed, leading to a significant divergence in views on important issues between Estonians and many non-Estonians living in Estonia. Over the past century – particularly over the past fifty years – a peculiar relationship has evolved

between these two groups. This relationship resembles a form of social coexistence in which each group behaves as if the other does not exist, always side by side but never together. On a group level, relationships remain subtly strained, although on an individual level, such as among neighbours, colleagues, or classmates, interactions are relatively normal.

This kind of shadow dance will persist until Estonians feel that the Russian community has a genuine desire to integrate, and the Russian-speaking community ceases to mistrust Estonians. Some non-Estonians who consider themselves well-integrated justifiably question how many times they must prove their loyalty if they have already done so by acquiring Estonian citizenship and learning the Estonian language. Among the older generation, there remains a sense of nostalgia for the Soviet Union, in which the Russian-speaking 'big brother' dominated. However, the silent consensus within Estonian society suggests that time will resolve this issue.

Russian aggression in Ukraine has added new dimensions to this complex dynamic. Initially, many non-Estonians tried to remain neutral regarding the issue of Russian aggression, but public opinion did not allow them to do so. Prominent members of the Russian community who were unwilling or insufficiently resolute

to decisively condemn Russia's actions faced public disapproval in the media. Different generations of non-Estonians could no longer discuss the topic of Russia and Ukraine even at family gatherings, as these discussions often led to conflicts. Additionally, the arrival of tens of thousands of Ukrainian war refugees in Estonia alarmed non-Estonians, who feared that Ukrainians would take jobs that had previously belonged to the Russian-speaking minority.

On the other hand, the Russian-Ukrainian war has had a catalytic effect on national issues that had remained unresolved and stagnated in Estonian society for decades. The most significant of these was the dismantling of the parallel Russian-language school system, a remnant of the Soviet era. For decades, the Russian-speaking school system produced a community that was less educated and less demanding, and who felt they were not full members of society. Their limited or non-existent Estonian language skills prevented them from pursuing a better education and higher-paying jobs. Graduates of Russian schools encountered a glass ceiling, formed by their own lack of language skills and unwillingness to integrate into Estonian society.

The problem was clearly acknowledged in Estonian society, but for various reasons political parties avoided addressing it for decades. It symbolised the coexistence of

two communities – the problem existed, everyone was aware of it, but nobody took action. The influential pro-Russian Centre Party, owing its popularity to a populist policy directed at non-Estonians, also contributed to this issue. The Centre Party consistently ensured that attempts to transition to a single Estonian-language school system failed, labelling the abolition of the Russian-language school system 'discrimination'.

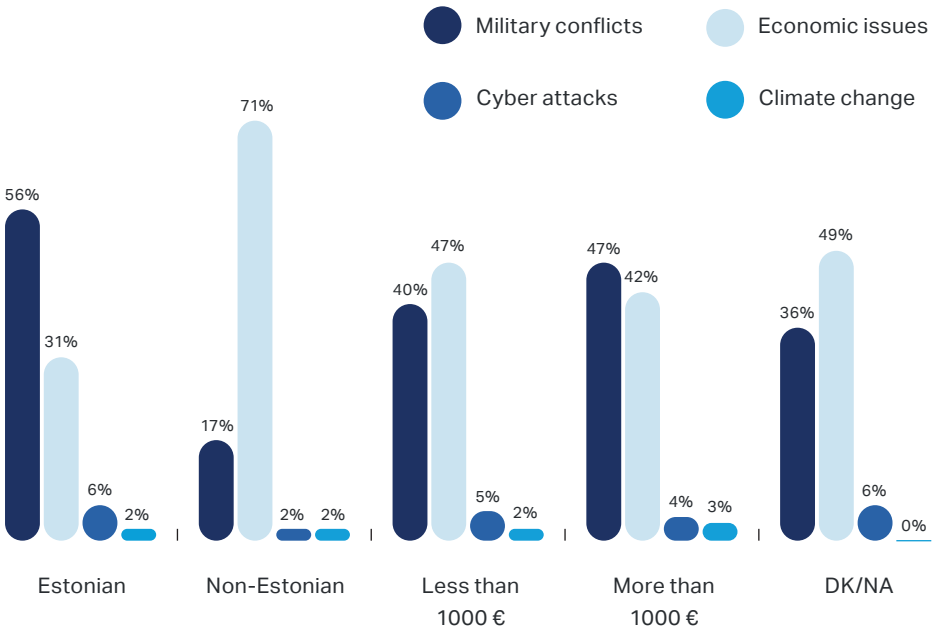
The war in Ukraine brought a new understanding within Estonian society that a unique opportunity had arisen to reorganise national relations. In 2022, ten months after the Russian attack on Ukraine, a programme was adopted for the transition to Estonian-language education, and implementation began. There seems to have been a breakthrough in the Russian community as well. It is now widely understood that, to ensure a better future for their children, it is imperative to place them in Estonian-language schools. However, this rapid change in attitudes and the swift transition have raised concerns among Estonian parents. In some schools, the transition might result in Estonian-speaking children becoming a minority in their classrooms, which has understandably caused unease.

Attitudes towards security

Security is an existential issue for Estonia. If Estonia and its allies cannot guarantee security, the Republic of Estonia will cease to exist. Estonians see Russia as the main source of military threat. When asked about the biggest external threat to Estonia, 56% of Estonians identified a military conflict. The only real military threat to Estonia comes from Russia. However, only 17% of non-Estonians considered a military conflict to be the biggest external threat. Instead, 71% of non-Estonians viewed economic

conditions as the greatest external threat, a sentiment shared by 31% of Estonians; respondents earning less than €1000/month were also more concerned. When including the threat of cyber attacks, 62% of Estonians regard military and hybrid conflicts as the biggest threats to Estonia. Notably, in Ida-Viru County, which has a predominantly Russian-speaking population, only 20% of respondents consider military conflict to be the greatest threat, despite their proximity to Russia.

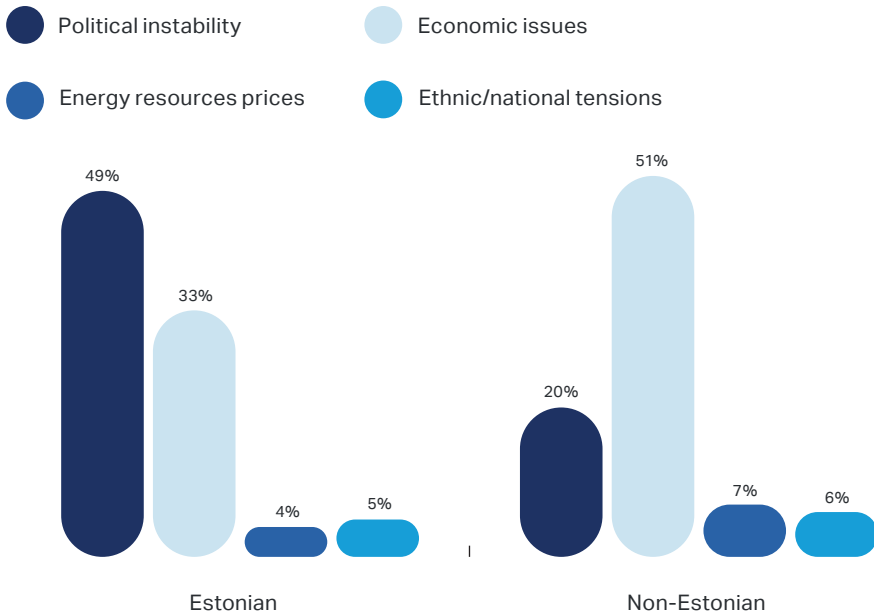
In your opinion, what is the most relevant external threat for Estonia?



Even when considering the greatest internal threat, the positions of Estonians and non-Estonians differ significantly. Among Estonians, 49% consider political instability, and 33% consider the economic situation to be the biggest internal threat. In contrast,

only 20% of non-Estonians view political instability as the primary threat, while 51% believe the greatest threat is the economic situation.

In your opinion, what is the most relevant internal threat for Estonia?



These responses reveal significant differences in the attitudes of Estonians and non-Estonians towards external and internal threats in Estonia. For Estonians, these are existential threats that may jeopardise the fate of the Republic of Estonia. In contrast, non-Estonians clearly emphasise economic issues. This disparity raises questions about their level of interest and involvement in domestic politics.

The lack of concern among non-Estonians regarding the apparent external threat may stem from several factors. These include a reluctance to express opinions on sensitive topics during the Ukrainian war to avoid conflict with prevailing public opinion in Estonian society, the impact of effective brainwashing by Russian propaganda, or a hope that things will eventually work out, regardless of the circumstances.



Nothing has changed

The war in Ukraine and Russia's continued threats against its neighbouring countries have significantly heightened anxiety in Estonia. This is because war crimes committed by Russia are not merely one topic among many in Estonia – they represent an unhealed historical wound. For Estonians, these current atrocities evoke memories of past traumas. The atrocities committed by the Soviet Union in 1940 and the crimes of communist extermination battalions in Estonia remain deeply ingrained in people's memories. The recollection is further stirred by Russia's actions in Ukraine. In 1944, the Soviet Union continued its occupation of Estonia and inflicted further harm on its population. Tens of thousands of Estonians were unjustly and forcibly deported to Siberia, where many perished due to the inhumane conditions. Countless Estonians were convicted on false charges and executed by the communists. This was followed by half a century of life behind barbed wire,

marked by poor conditions, ideological indoctrination, and the brutal oppression of communist authorities. Nearly every Estonian family has been affected by these communist crimes, and the memories are passed down through the generations.

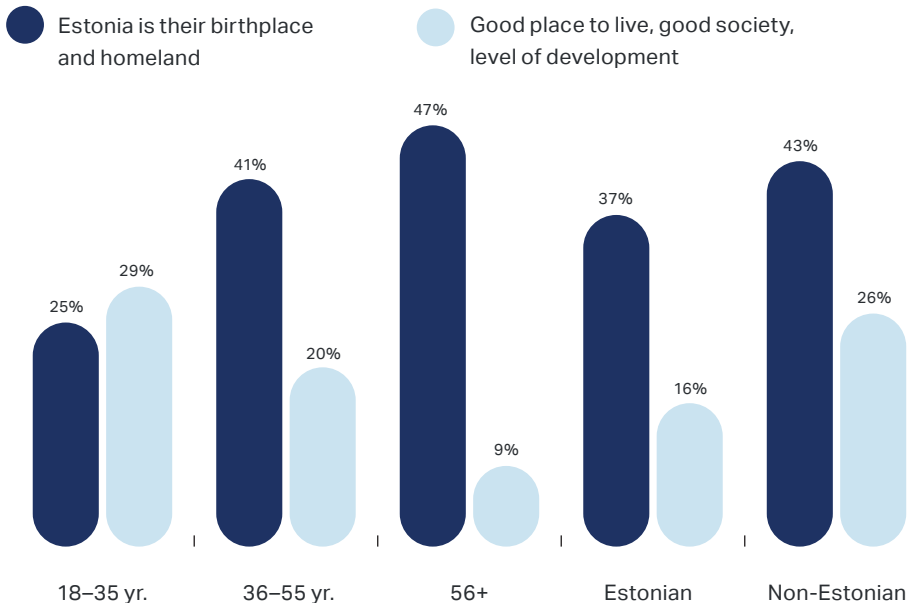
Russia's war crimes in Ukraine awaken memories that many Estonians have read about in history books or heard from family members. The suffering endured by the parents or grandparents of today's Estonians during the 1940s and 1950s resonates deeply. If Russia were to attack Estonia again, as Moscow has repeatedly threatened, there are no illusions about the fact that the bloodshed witnessed in places like Bucha would also occur in Estonia. The methods of the aggressor have not changed. The dream of Estonians – an independent, democratic state – is once again under threat. This reality has instilled a resolute determination to defend ourselves.

When luck favours us

Despite facing challenging times, 70% of respondents express either happiness or great happiness, while 24% report feeling unhappy. Examining the differences between the responses of Estonians and non-Estonians, it becomes apparent that Estonian respondents, on the whole, express greater satisfaction with their lives than their non-Estonian counterparts. This disparity is also reflected geographically, with higher levels of dissatisfaction observed primarily among non-Estonians in eastern regions of Estonia.

This discrepancy extends to various aspects of life satisfaction, including overall happiness, satisfaction with one's standard of living, state of health, and achievements in life. In these regards, non-Estonians express roughly 10% lower levels of satisfaction compared with Estonians. However, satisfaction levels in the realm of personal and family relationships are nearly equal between Estonians and non-Estonians. Non-Estonians also indicate slightly lower satisfaction levels concerning their overall sense of security and sense of belonging to a community.

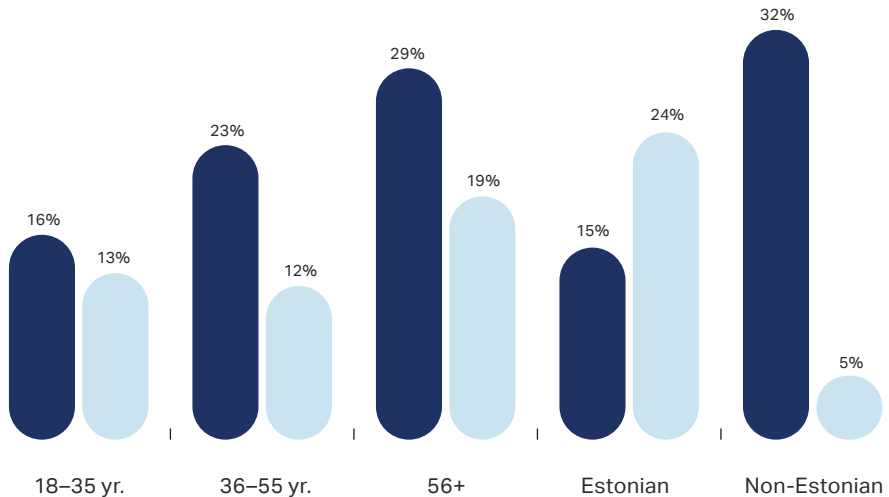
Why do you want your children to live in Estonia?



Why do you want your children not to live in Estonia?

● I don't see a future in Estonia / Life in Estonia is going downhill

● Children want to live elsewhere / There must be a chance to see the world

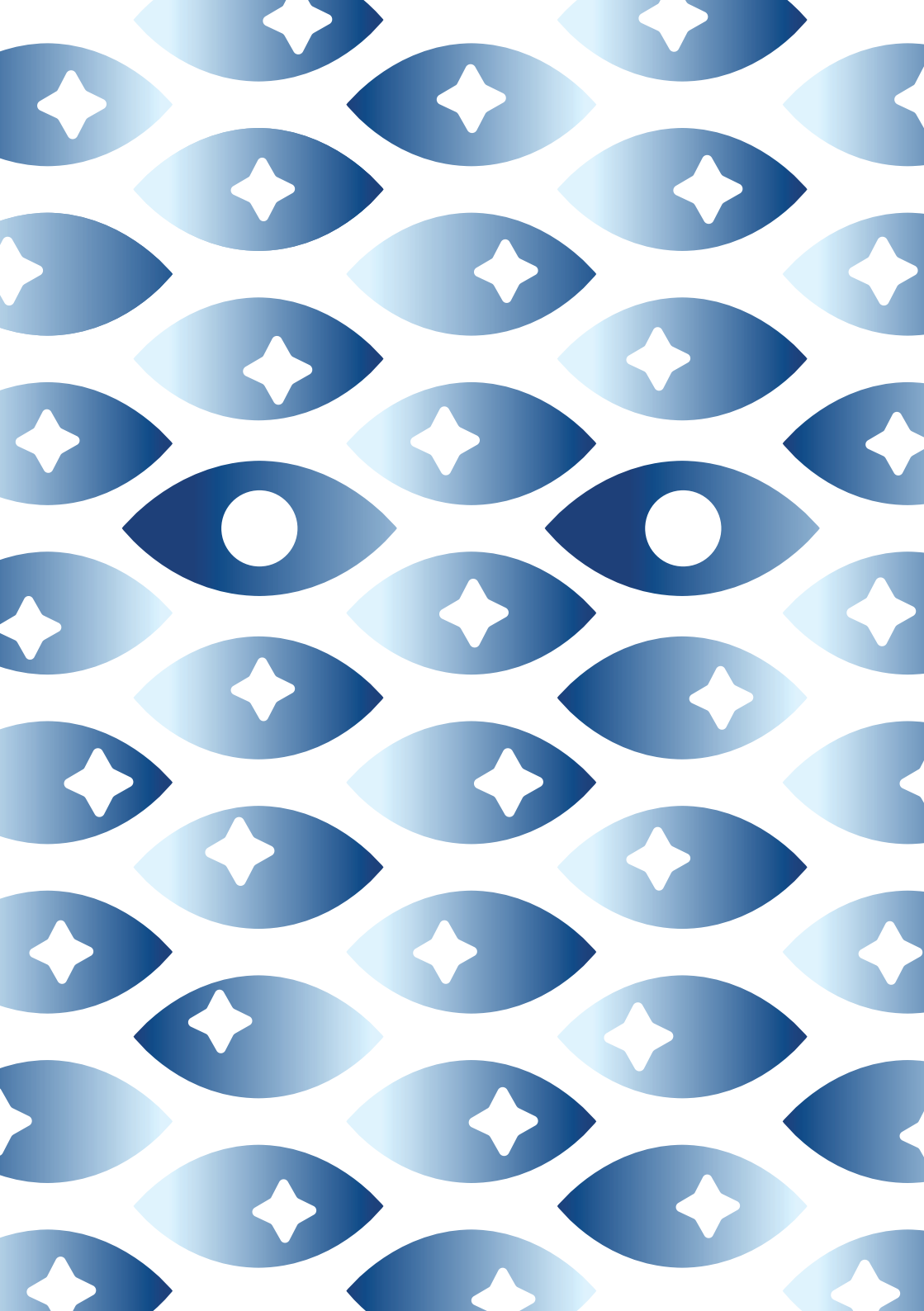


The question of satisfaction with the political system requires some context. Estonians closely monitor political affairs and government activities, taking a critical stance and seeking improvements in efficient governance and institutional functionality. Responses to surveys are likely shaped by both domestic and foreign policy challenges confronting the current government of the Republic of Estonia, including the budget deficit and the intricate international landscape.

Non-Estonians, on the other hand, exhibit notably lower interest in Estonian politics, focusing particularly on educational matters, such as the transition to the

Estonian language, interactions between non-Estonians and the state, citizenship concerns, and relations with Russia. Consequently, responses to the query 'How satisfied are you with the political system and government of the country, reflect distinct concerns among Estonians and non-Estonians, rendering direct comparisons inappropriate.

Overall, satisfaction with the country's political system and government stands at 20%, with 74% of respondents expressing either some or considerable dissatisfaction. Specifically, satisfaction rates are at 23% among Estonians and 12% among non-Estonians, with dissatisfaction levels at



75% among the latter group. While it's anticipated that Estonians would generally express higher job satisfaction than non-Estonians, and dissatisfaction might be more pronounced in areas with significant non-Estonian populations, substantial discrepancies are not observed.

When examining responses to the question 'How would you describe the current mood of the Estonian population?' it's important to acknowledge that these answers are likely shaped by the differing perspectives of Estonians and non-Estonians, as evidenced by previous responses. Non-Estonians tend to harbour somewhat more pessimistic views regarding the likelihood of a promising future, with greater levels of uncertainty prevalent among them.

While the mood of Estonians may be tempered by concerns such as the conflict in Ukraine and existential threats to Estonia, non-Estonians are preoccupied primarily with issues such as the transition from Russian-language to Estonian-language schooling, personal financial management, and citizenship matters.

In conclusion, while disparities between Estonians and non-Estonians are not significant in terms of overall satisfaction, the latter group tends to exhibit slightly lower levels of contentment. On a personal level, however, both groups appear to be on an equal footing regarding interpersonal relationships and intimacy.

Dreams as a survival strategy

There's a saying that captures the essence of the Estonian dream: Estonians wish to reside in their own home, surrounded by forest, but also near the sea and in the city centre – all at once. While achieving this may seem daunting, it's a goal worth pursuing.

However, it is harder to talk about The Estonia's dream of the country itself. Undoubtedly, the pinnacle of Estonia's aspirations was realised with the establishment of the Republic of Estonia in 1920, following a two-year struggle in the War of Independence against communist Russia. The Republic's independence

endured for two decades until the outbreak of the Second World War, which brought forth a harsh Soviet occupation, succeeded a year later by Nazi Germany's invasion. Following the war's end, Estonia once again fell under Soviet rule until the collapse of the Soviet Union.

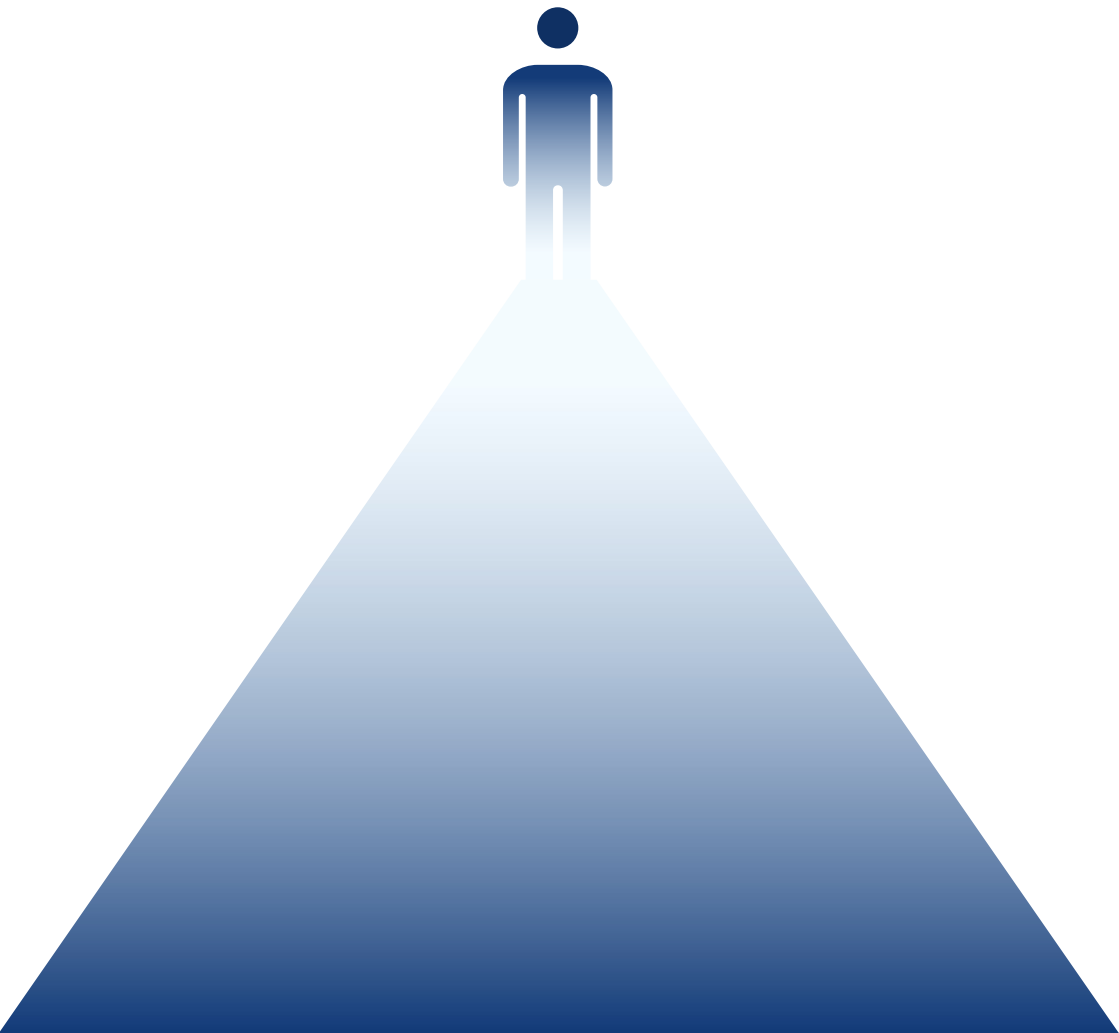
Upon reclaiming independence in 1991, Estonia's foremost ambition was to secure international economic and security guarantees, aiming to avoid the isolation that proved fatal in 1940. This aspiration unified the whole nation.

You need a long-term perspective to make your dreams come true. Dreams are actually strategic goals to move towards. The long-term strategy of Estonians can be expressed this way: we have lived in Estonia for 5,000 years and will live for at least 5,000 more! This provides the 'strategic depth' necessary for survival. Estonia, despite its small territory, stretches back thousands of years. Equipped with such self-confidence, Estonians look quite boldly to the future, because history has shown that the nation has managed to pull itself together even after painful losses. In order to boost the falling birth rate, several state subsidies and measures have been introduced, which are among the most generous in Europe and include both parents.

According to a recent integration survey of Estonian society, the community of non-Estonians is not uniform, but is divided into different groups. The oldest among non-Estonians make little effort to integrate and learn Estonian, and the Estonian population has largely accepted this. The integration strategies of younger middle-aged and middle-aged non-Estonians may be different: more and more people want Estonian citizenship and are making efforts to obtain it. The number of applicants for Estonian citizenship is growing year by year. Along with the transition to an Estonian-language school system, the number of Russian-speaking parents who want to send their children to Estonian schools in order to secure a better future for them has increased sharply. True, this is also because the Russian-language school system is dwindling. Russian-language schools were a separate system that exists to this day as a legacy of the Soviet era, which until now has made it possible to avoid closer ties

with the Estonian state. It seems that an understanding that integration pays off is finally becoming entrenched in the non-Estonian community. The Russian attack on Ukraine and the destruction of Russia's reputation in Estonian society have forced non-Estonians to make a clear choice. The litmus test is the question: 'Who does Crimea belong to?'

Non-Estonians do not share a common long-term strategy for Estonia. While the older generation still looks towards Moscow, part of the middle-aged generation has made the decision to integrate or has integrated with others in the same group, in a communally Russian-speaking environment. The younger generation of educated professionals is rather cosmopolitan, moving freely in the Estonian, Russian, and English-speaking media world, and they too make decisions in favour of studying in Estonian. The Russian war in Ukraine, which has created a gap between the older and younger generations of Russian-speaking Estonians, will certainly influence these choices. Broadly speaking, non-Estonians in Estonia have three possible future strategies: to go back to Russia, to integrate in Estonia, or to move elsewhere in Europe. Because no one wants to go to Russia and no one expects to go to Europe, there is no choice but to start integrating, because Estonian society is also applying a lot of pressure. The remarkable number of Ukrainian war refugees in Estonia, who have already proven their willingness to integrate actively, also indirectly forms part of this pressure. Given the public support for Ukrainian refugees, they may endanger jobs in various sectors that were previously in the hands of local Russian speakers.



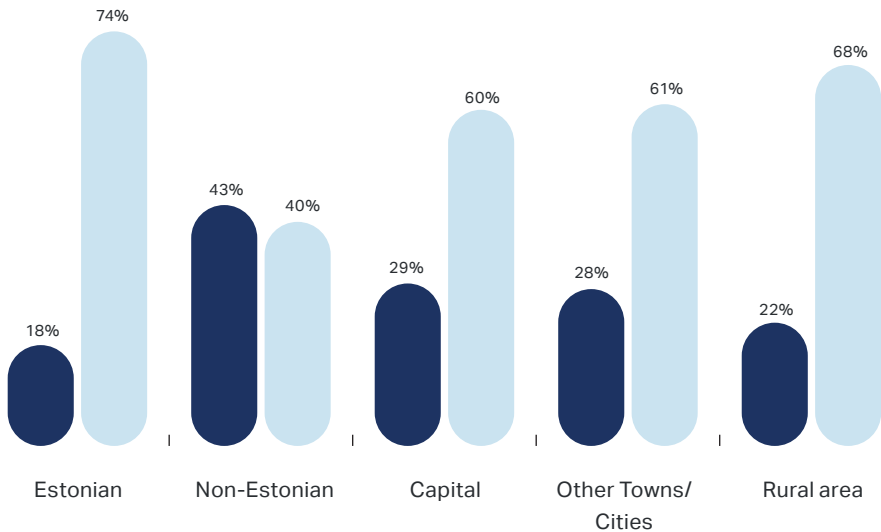
Freedom or well-being?

The differences between the Estonian and non-Estonian worlds are expressed most clearly in their answers to questions about the ideal Estonia. When asked, 'What is more important, freedom or material well-being?' 90% of Estonians chose freedom, while 7% chose material well-being. Among non-Estonians, 21% prioritised material well-being, and 60% rated freedom as the ultimate goal. This reflects a 30% difference between the respective attitudes towards freedom as the ultimate goal.

Attitudes towards the model of state and governance along the axis of authoritarianism vs. political freedoms and democracy are noteworthy. Among Estonians, 74% believe that political freedoms and democracy should never be compromised, compared with only 40% of non-Estonians. Conversely, only 18% of Estonians think that the state needs an authoritarian leader to set things in order and take care of people, whereas 43% of non-Estonians support the idea of an authoritarian leader.

Which model of state structure and governance do you think is better for Estonia?

- The country needs a strong leader in power who can bring order to the country and take care of the people
- Political freedom and democracy are things that can never be sacrificed



Similar differences prevail in opinions on the direction Estonia should take in terms of further political, economic, and social development. Among Estonians, 45% believe they need to strengthen and deepen relations with the European Union, while only 3% support strengthening relations with Russia. In contrast, 22% of non-Estonians support strengthening ties with Russia, even if it would lead to weakening ties with the European Union and other countries. This trend is especially noticeable in eastern Estonia, which is inhabited predominantly by non-Estonians.

Among non-Estonians, only 10% approve of the current course of the Estonian state, while 70% think it is wrong. In contrast, 35% of Estonians approve of the current course and 46% consider it wrong.

What is the ideal Estonia for Estonians and non-Estonians? We examined responses to the question 'Should Estonia be as purely national as possible, where the Estonian language and culture dominate everywhere, or multi-ethnic, where other languages and cultures develop and coexist with the Estonian language and culture?'

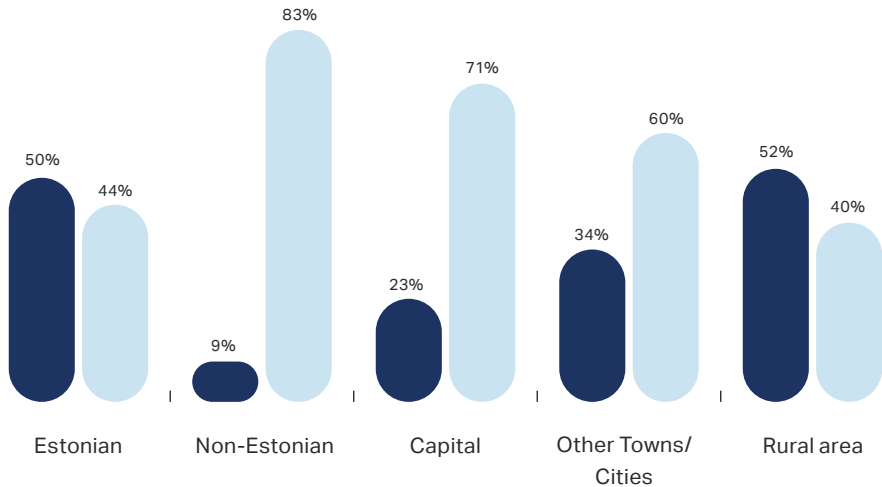
Among Estonians, 50% support the idea of a purely national Estonia, while 44% favour a multi-ethnic Estonia. Support for an Estonian nation-state is even higher among those with lower incomes and those living in rural areas.

In contrast, 83% of non-Estonians support the idea of a multi-ethnic Estonia, and only 9% favour an Estonian-dominated nation-state.

Nonetheless, Article 1 of the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia clearly expresses the principles of state sovereignty, people's sovereignty, nation-state, democracy, and republicanism.

What, in your opinion, should be the ideal Estonia ...?

- Pure national (as national as possible) – i.e. where Estonian language and culture are dominant everywhere
- Multinational – i.e. where other languages and cultures coexist and develop alongside with Estonian language and culture



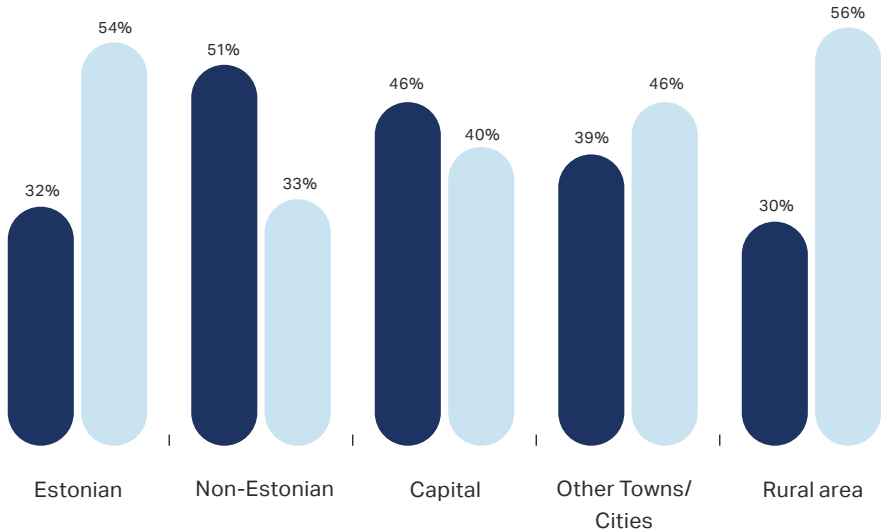
Managing expectations

Perhaps unintentionally, but convincingly, this study has highlighted that when examining the Estonian dream, it is more accurate to speak of the separate dreams of Estonians and non-Estonians. There is a significant degree of mistrust between these groups for historical reasons, and they may have different goals or ideals stemming from historical, ideological, or other factors.

So far, the two communities in Estonia have lived somewhat separately, like participants in a shadow theatre, each living their own lives and often pretending the other does not exist. Non-Estonians have had their own Russian-language schools, media, theatre, cultural environment, and share of the labour market. This has functioned like a closed system with little contact with the Estonian world.

In what society would you rather live?

- One where there is social equality
- One where personal freedoms are more important



Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022 made it impossible for such a parallel world to continue. In today's Estonia, the question 'Who does Crimea belong to?' cannot be answered vaguely or evasively. Estonian society has taken a decisive step towards eliminating the Russian-language school system, which has so far produced less educated and poorly integrated Russian-speaking young people. The transition

to Estonian-language education comes with many practical challenges, but it is an indispensable step towards the adoption of the Estonian language and culture by non-Estonian young people. If the residents of Estonia are asked again about their dreams in a year's time, one hopes to be able to say that the Estonian dream is the dream of all the people in Estonia.

Research Design

Technical characteristics of the survey

Population: Population of Estonia aged 18-74. According to Statistics Estonia from 01.01.2023, Estonia had 970,218 inhabitants aged 18-74. The survey was conducted all over Estonia.

Sample size: The sample size of the study was 1,002 respondents.

Sampling methods: Data collection was conducted as a web survey using the web panel of Turu-uuringute AS. After the completion of the survey, the distribution of the respondents on the basis of gender, age group, nationality, and region was compared with the sample and the data were weighted. The data processing package SPSS for Windows 29.0 was used to process the survey results.

Time of survey: The data for this study was collected from 20 to 28 March, 2024.

For access to the entire dataset, please contact Toms Zariņš: toms.zarins@fes.de

Acknowledgements

Many colleagues and institutions were involved in the exciting process of preparing and executing this publication. We would like to thank our partner, the research centre Turu-uuringute AS, in particular Irina Strapatšuk and Tõnis Stamberg, who conducted the public opinion poll on our behalf and consulted on many related matters.

Special thanks to Edgars Zvirgzdiņš and Ainis Permins from the design studio Associates, Partners et Sons, who designed all graphs and visuals as well as the layout of the publication.

Last but not least, many thanks to Ludwig List (FES Austria) and Imke Gellermann (FES HQ Berlin), who helped to facilitate good discussions and a smooth process.

Coordinator of the project and publication in all three Baltic states: Kristis Šukevičs (FES Latvia).

Jolanta Steikūnaitė-Babarské was responsible for Lithuania (FES Lithuania).

Toms Zariņš and Kristis Šukevičs were responsible for Latvia (FES Latvia).

Ülle Kesküla as well as Toms Zariņš and Kristis Šukevičs were responsible for Estonia (FES Estonia and Latvia).

Dr Reinhard Krumm was the initiator of this project and was responsible for the final editing of the publications for all three Baltic states.

